



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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Knowledge networks and Australian Football League coach development: People of influence

Cliff Mallett, Tony Rossi & Richard Tinning

The University of Queensland, Australia

Introduction

Australian Football League (AFL) generally recognised as the 'national game' in Australia has a well established program of coach development. However, research examining AFL coaches' work and how they learn to perform that work has hitherto not been conducted. The effective preparation of coaches is of prime concern to the AFL and should be informed by an examination of how coaches within the code come to know how to do their coaching work. Therefore, the purpose of this AFL-funded research was to inform coach development programs for current and aspiring AFL coaches.

Background

Wenger's (1998) social view of learning proposes that learning takes place through engagement in social practice. Central to Wenger's view of learning is the concept of a community of practice (CoP) in which members of the community share common purposes and who develop their knowledge through solving mutual problems and developing resources and shared practices through regular social interaction. Three key dimensions characterize a CoP—mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). The nature of the relations between members of the CoP, which is continually changing, will be influenced by these three elements.

Culver and Trudel (2006) propose that in team sports, coaches have the potential to form a coaches' community of practice (CCoP). Although a CCoP is possible within team sport environments, the highly contested nature of professional sports such as the AFL might inhibit the development of a fully functioning CCoP. In team sports, all three elements might characterize the relations between the members (e.g., head and assistant coaches); however, the depth and quality of interaction between members might vary both within and between teams. Perhaps the degree to which an AFL team functions as an effective CCoP, might be contingent upon the quality of leadership delivered by the Head Coach. The quality of relations between coaches in elite sporting teams probably depends upon a high level of trust and respect and in the world of elite sport in which performance outcomes determines perceptions of success and subsequent coach employment, it is perhaps naive to expect significant free exchange of information between coaches. Therefore, the extent to which a CCoP in professional team sports can operate exclusively as a joint enterprise is questionable. Moreover, the development of a CCoP is self-selecting and highlights the personal agency in determining the level of co-operation between members. Therefore, the development of an effective CCoP in professional sporting teams might be considered problematic.

Wright (et al., in press, cited in Culver & Trudel, 2006) found that coaches seek information to develop their practice from sources external to their CoP. In attempting to understand the "web" of social relations formed by coaches in developing their craft, Galipeau and Trudel (2006) proposed that coaches learn from others through two alternative modes of social interaction: informal knowledge networks (IKN; Allee, 2000) and networks of practice (NoP; Nichani & Hung, 2002). The notion of IKN according to Allee (2000) differs from a CoP in the sense that there is no joint enterprise that binds them together. IKNs operate when coaches generally know each other and informally interact to share information. In NoP, coaches are less familiar with other members whose regular interaction is typically through communication technologies such as the internet (Allee, 2000). Furthermore, reciprocity is not generally a feature of communication within NoP (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Culver and Trudel (2006) propose that the types of social interactions engaged by coaches, influences the quality of coaching experiences and the subsequent development of practice. Coaches interact with others (e.g., coaches) but the nature of these interactions can both facilitate and inhibit learning and therefore some further understanding of these social relations is underscored.

In this paper, the social networks used in developing coaching knowledge and practice that operate within the AFL were examined within the theoretical framework of three modes of social interaction: CCoP, IKN, and NoP. A clearer understanding of the nature of social relations in developing coaching knowledge and practice seeks to inform coach development programs in the AFL.

Method

Participants

Five Senior Coaches (SC), six Assistant Coaches (AC) and five Administrators (of whom five were former coaches) at different clubs were recruited for the research project. Participants were drawn from the current and past Senior and Assistant Coaches in the AFL and their participation in the project was voluntary and conducted through the AFL Coaches' Association. Eleven of the 16 AFL Clubs were represented in the project.

Procedures

Each participant was interviewed for approximately 45-90 minutes. Questions from the semi-structured interview schedule focused on the major sources for learning coaching tasks in their AFL clubs. Interviews were audio-taped with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis. All transcribed interviews were returned to the participants for member checking after which some changes were made.

Data Analysis

The investigators conducted an interpretative analysis of the interview data using Nvivo (Version 7), which facilitated the identification of common themes associated with what and how AFL coaches learn.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the participants were very experienced former elite players ($M = 14.8$ years; range = 7-26) cum experienced elite coaches ($M = 10.2$ years; range = 5-34), who were generally well educated at the tertiary level and through the NCAS. The pathway to becoming a coach (AC & SC) was from a background as a player, which provided early career coaches some 'street credibility'. However, the initial appointment as an AC and the progression through to SC was considered 'ad hoc'.

All participating coaches were highly agentic in developing their coaching practice and a competitive spirit to be successful fuelled this self-motivation. They were driven to become better and sought their information from several sources. Although the coaches sought information from many sources (e.g., formal study, books) the strong reliance on learning from other people was clearly evident. All participating coaches reported the development of a *dynamic social network*, which took several years to take shape and continually evolved throughout their careers.

The philosophy and practices of the SC largely determined the degree to which the ACs from the various clubs engaged in a functioning CCoP. The ACs learned mostly from their SCs, other ACs and former coaches; and over time developed a dynamic social network with whom they discussed and reflected upon their work that initially involved people within the club and sport and then probably as confidence grew they sought help from outside the sport. A major issue for the ACs was finding other people they trusted and respected both inside and outside their club. ACs did not rely solely on the perceived CCoP. Due to the limitations of a club's CCoP, the ACs sought alternative sources of information, including a form of IKNs, which like the CCoP were dynamic in their membership, which we termed a *dynamic social network*. The AFL partially support coaches' learning through the use of a formalized ambassadors (mentoring) program, which was found to be useful in the early careers of some coaches, which makes the use of the term informal knowledge networks seem inappropriate. Hence, the term that seemed to describe best the set of relations between people in this research project, was a dynamic social network that reflected a changing set of relations between social actors as AFL coaches sought information to assist in solving their presenting issues.

The evolution of a dynamic social network was even more evident for the SC. The SCs also searched for people whom they respected and trusted to assist in their development. In the early stages of their SC career, they were strongly influenced by their own coaches as players and former coaches who had 'been there before', which was consistent with previous research (e.g., Sage, 1989). The perceived benefits of a CCoP for the SC within the various clubs differed, which caused the SCs to seek others to assist in their development. Although the SCs were driven to find solutions to their problems their sense of isolation partly created by personal ego and a lack of trust (mostly associated with job security) necessitated the development of a personal dynamic social network that continued to evolve - e.g., assistance from people from outside their social (coaching) network and sometimes from outside AFL and sport itself.

The highly contested nature of AFL coaches' work necessitates the development of dynamic social networks that includes a partially functioning CCoP and IKNs within an AFL team structure. Although the SC should encourage the development of a CCoP, the possible lack of trust and respect in the highly contested environment of the AFL is likely to inhibit a fully functioning CCoP. The AFL coaches autonomously sought others who they trusted and respected, which in most cases took some time to develop. As coaches developed their craft they sought new members to assist in their development and thus developed a dynamic social network, which can be both formal and informal. The participants made little reference to the use of NoP.

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